Yes, deer and small animals are more likely to eat garden plants during a drought. This happens for several reasons related to the reduced availability and quality of their natural food sources and water.

Why drought increases garden raiding

- **Reduced native forage:** Drought causes wild food sources like forbs (broad-leaf plants and weeds), fruits, berries, and acorns to become scarce, less palatable, or less nutritious.
- **Decline in nutritional value:** Even the wild vegetation that survives the dry conditions is less nutritious and less digestible for herbivores.
- **Desperation for water:** A well-irrigated garden is a source of both food and water for thirsty animals. Desperate animals may even chew on hoses to get water.
- **Increased risk-taking:** When natural resources are depleted, hungry animals will venture farther and take more risks to find food, including entering suburban or urban areas.
- **More competition:** With food and water sources limited, animals are forced to compete more aggressively for the remaining resources. This can drive weaker or less dominant animals to seek food in new places, such as your garden.

How drought affects specific animals

- **Deer:** A mature deer eats 6 to 10 pounds of food per day. During a drought, with less nutritious wild forage, they will seek out tender, protein-rich garden plants, including vegetables and flowers. Deer may also eat plants they normally avoid if they are hungry enough.
- **Rabbits:** Like deer, rabbits rely on forbs and other low-growing vegetation that dries out during a drought. A lush garden becomes a very attractive alternative food source.
- **Raccoons:** Drought can reduce the availability of natural foods like berries, nuts, and insects. This will drive raccoons to look for alternatives, including garden vegetables, pet food, and garbage.
- **Rodents (mice and rats):** Drought can cause a scarcity of seeds and insects, which are staples for many rodents. Studies of desert rodents show that during dry periods, they shift their diet to whatever food is available.
- **Bears:** If drought affects berries and acorns, bears will move closer to human habitation and eat from garbage cans, bird feeders, and vegetable gardens.

What this means for your garden

If your area is experiencing a drought, the wildlife in your vicinity will be under significant stress. Even if your garden is typically not bothered by animals, a prolonged drought increases the risk of damage. You can protect your plants by taking proactive measures like installing fencing, using animal repellents, or planting drought-tolerant and deer-resistant species.